VETERANS

Bringing Dogs to Heal

It has taken nearly a decade of war—and the lack of a cure for posttraumatic stress disorder—to get officials to study the benefits of giving service animals to mentally ailing soldiers and veterans

BY MARK THOMPSON

STAFF SERGEANT BRAD FASNACHT was clearing mines on an Afghan road a year ago when an IED blast broke his spine and both ankles and put him in a two-week stupor that ended only when he woke up, 7,000 miles away, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. The explosion had knocked his helmeted head so violently, he suffered a traumatic brain injury, which exacerbates his posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although Army doctors and nurses have been able to get the 26-year-old walking again, he has had to call in a specialist—Sapper, an Australian cattle dog mix—to help tackle his PTSD.

"He has changed my life," Fasnacht says of the 1-year-old mutt, whose name is shorthand for "combat engineer," Fasnacht's Army job. Sapper goes with him whenever he leaves his Silver Spring, Md., apartment, something he was terrified of doing until he got his canine companion in April. Three combat tours and two Purple Hearts had left him in a state of hypervigilance, constantly scanning suburban streets and trees for snipers. War had made him wary of crowds—and even of individuals who got a little too close. "I'd just freak out, getting really uneasy," he says. "But not anymore." The speckled dog calms Fasnacht's anxieties and keeps them from mushrooming into panic attacks. Part bodyguard, part therapist, Sapper also serves as an extra set of eyes and ears. "I've lost some of my hearing, but Sapper alerts me if someone is coming up behind me," he says. When Fasnacht is sleeping, the dog will wake him from a nightmare by licking his face.

As researchers test high-tech PTSD treatments (such as hyperbaric oxygen chambers and virtual-reality exposure therapy), a low-tech alternative is emerging in the form of man's best friend. Although the government has been providing service dogs to troops who have lost their sight or suffered other physical injuries, it is only beginning to look into whether these animals can improve the lives of those who are psychically injured. The need for good treatment options is enormous: some 40,000 troops have been physically wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq, but 10 times as many exhibit symptoms of PTSD.

Amid all this hard-to-heal pain, veterans and dog-training organizations, some with playful names like Patriot Paws and Hounds4Heroes, are rushing to pair wounded vets with trained canines. One of the leaders of this movement, Dave Sharpe, 31, was so traumatized during deployments to Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan that his anxiety and recurring nightmares kept him largely confined to his Yorktown, Va., home. "I was always looking for a fight," he says. "I was beating on the walls." But he says all that changed when a friend encouraged him in 2002 to visit an animal-rescue shelter, where he spied 2-month-old Cheyenne. Not long after he adopted the brown and white pit bull mix, Sharpe had another dream about the Taliban sympathizer who pulled a gun on him. When Sharpe woke up in a cold sweat, the dog was

Vet care *Dave Sharpe had trouble leaving his Yorktown, Va., home until Cheyenne helped ease the former airman's anxiety*

Photographs by Gillian Laub for TIME

watching him. "What are you looking at?" he recalls yelling. Cheyenne barked in response, and after he told her to shut up, she barked again, prompting him to wrap her in his arms, collapse on his bed and tell her everything that was weighing on his mind. "I just lost it," he says. "I have no idea why, but I felt completely at ease."

Sharpe credits the dog for such a dramatic improvement in his PTSD that he went on to found the nonprofit P2V—short for Pets2Vets—last year. Since then, he has been sharing his story with soldiers, cops, firefighters, first responders—people who could use their own Cheyenne—and has given dogs to Fasnacht and some 20 other vets. His promise to servicemen and -women in need: "We'll get you your pet within a month, maximum."

Not everyone is convinced such quick pairings are a good idea. For starters, it's still an open question whether dogs actually help alleviate PTSD. Both the VA and the Army are launching studies designed to confirm widespread anecdotal evidence that the benefits are real. And if they are, the next big question is whether shelter dogs like Sapper, who took two weeks and $350 to train, provide as much relief as specially trained dogs, which take two years—and up to $35,000—before they are ready to be paired with a wounded vet. "I really believe the dogs can provide tremendous benefits," says Minnesota Senator Al Franken, who authored a law ordering the VA to study dogs' effects on PTSD sufferers. "The whole point of this is to measure in a scientifically valid way what the benefits are of service dogs to vets with psychological injuries and make a better life for these guys and women who have put everything on the line for us."

Better than Music and Art

MENTAL-HEALTH EXPERTS HAVE BEEN looking into canine-centric therapies for years. Sandra Barker, a psychiatry professor at Virginia Commonwealth University (and yes, she is used to all the jokes about her last name), published a study in 1998 that found psychiatric patients' anxiety dropped twice as much after spending 30 minutes with dogs as it did following standard therapeutic recreation involving music and art. A 2003 Barker study reported a "significant reduction" in fear among patients awaiting electroconvulsive therapy after spending only 15 minutes with dogs. And in March she published a study detailing the "buffering effect" dogs have on the stress experienced by their human partners, as measured through cortisol levels, heart rate and blood pressure.

The next big question is whether shelter dogs provide as much relief as specially trained dogs that can cost up to $35,000

Given her findings, it's not surprising that Walter Reed and other military medical centers have started stationing dogs on hospital floors to help calm patients. "The potential for animals to be another form of alternative medicine is enormous," says Elspeth Ritchie, a former Army colonel who just retired as one of the service's top psychiatrists.

With a push from Franken, the VA is planning to place dogs—for which it will pay $10,000 apiece—with up to 200 vets suffering from mental and physical ailments. The Army is considering a similar program. But both plan to use only service dogs trained by groups belonging to Assistance Dogs International (ADI), which represents 73 U.S. dog-training organizations. That's because such a designation gives dogs access to airports, hotels and other public spaces that don't allow common pets. "In a restaurant, you don't want a dog groveling around for a dropped french fry or urinating on the carpet," says Corey Hudson, president of ADI's North American branch and head of Canine Companions for Independence in Santa Rosa, Calif. "That requires two years of training."

Sebastian "Sam" Cila was lucky enough to be given one of the 2,000 or so service dogs that are trained annually in the U.S. The retired Army National Guard sergeant from Riverhead, N.Y., had been through hell since July 4, 2005, when an IED in Iraq shredded much of his left arm. Three years and more than 40 surgeries later, he had to have his left hand amputated. "The loss of my hand put me into a tailspin, and I fell into a deep depression," says Cila, 37. When Gillian, a black Labrador arrived in February, she knew how to do things like open doors and turn off lights. But like some other service dogs trained to detect the onset of seizures, Gillian can alert him to the little things that can trigger panic attacks or angry outbursts that can be tough to control—and help him avoid them. "Now when I feel stressed, irritable or anxious, she definitely relieves all those symptoms," Cila says of his PTSD. "I definitely still have it, but I've learned, with the help of Gillian, how to deal with it better."

But certified service dogs like Gillian don't come equipped with more PTSD-specific commands than cheaper mutts do. "Your average service dog coming out of these agencies can do 82 different tasks. But if you've got a veteran whose main problem is PTSD, what does turning on a light switch do for him?" asks Jim Stanek, 30, who ended three tours in Iraq with PTSD and now runs Paws and Stripes in Albuquerque, N.M., pairing dogs with mentally ailing vets.

PTSD-Specific Tasks

STANEK TRAINS HIS DOGS TO PERFORM 10 or so PTSD-specific tasks. Some of them are designed to ease concerns about blind spots, not unlike the way a military unit designates someone to watch troops' backs or to scout ahead. Stanek's 2-year-old Catahoula mix, Sarge, for example, has been trained to check around the corner to see what's in the next aisle at a store.

Efforts by Stanek—whose group is willing to train a family pet if it meets age, size and temperament requirements—and others advocating cheaply trained dogs just got a boost from the Justice Department. In September it tweaked regulations clarifying parts of 1990's Americans with Disabilities Act. The amendments limit the definition of service animals to dogs. (Sorry, pigs and parrots—although the agency left the door open to miniature horses, in part because they live a lot longer than dogs.) To qualify as a service animal, dogs must be trained to do work or perform tasks like "providing safety checks and room searches for persons with PTSD," the agency noted. But the dogs do not have to be formally trained by an ADI-approved school. Such a requirement "might limit access to service animals for individuals with limited financial resources," the department said.

The new regulations take effect March 15. And perhaps the sight of seemingly healthy men and women with seemingly run-of-the-mill mutts on planes or college campuses or in restaurants or places of worship will lead to more conversations about PTSD. "People ask about the dog, and it's kind of forced me to talk to them, which is something I didn't want to do," says Stanek. "A comfort comes from having a second set of eyes that doesn't judge." ■

Serviceman's Best Friend
See how canine companions assist psychically injured soldiers and veterans, at **time.com/dogs_of_war**

GILLIAN LAUB FOR TIME

Reservoir dog *Gillian helped pull Sam Cila of Riverhead, N.Y., out of a deep depression after an IED in Iraq cost him his hand*